The making of orthodoxy

Essays in honour of Henry Chadwick

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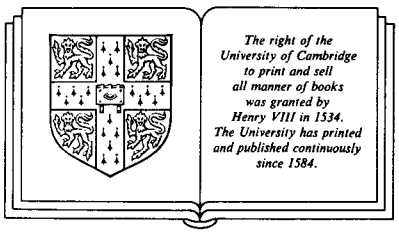

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Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?

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I

Henry Chadwick's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor at Oxford sketched out,[1] economically and elegantly, some aspects of the problem confronting every historian of early Christian thought, the problem of how to discern and define the *self-perception* of the first Christian communities: how, with reference to what, did they define themselves? Chadwick portrays a tension between two models of authoritative self-identification, the 'circle' and the 'ellipse' – the unified institution with a definable centre providing a norm or touchstone for right belief, and the network of communities linked by their common origins in Jerusalem and the events transacted there at the navel of the earth.[2] In some sense, the narrative of Paul's career as set out in the Acts of the Apostles dramatizes this tension: the movement is necessarily and inevitably away from Jerusalem, itself originally the centre of a 'circle', the church of the circumcision (pp. 4–5), towards the administrative heart of the Roman civilized world (pp. 12–16); but Rome cannot replace Jerusalem or assert a unilateral sovereignty over the churches that stem from the events in Jerusalem. In spite of all temptations (and efforts), Rome never comes to be taken for granted as the sole standard of the church's self-definition; the circle model never quite triumphs (p. 12). In one way or another, the idea of the church as a family united in virtue of its ancestry rather than of its present organizational structure persists.

The Agreed Statements of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) seem to cast their shadow before them here: it is not hard to see how Henry Chadwick's influence came to be so weighty in this latter context. But the issues raised are in fact far more complex than the agenda of ARCIC. Chadwick in his lecture seems to

be alluding, if only rather distantly, to the well-known thesis of Walter Bauer's essay on *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*:[3] all around the Mediterranean world and, even more, beyond the boundaries of the empire, in Syria, 'orthodoxy' tends to be a late growth. The prevailing early forms of Christianity are generally at odds with what later defined itself as normative; and only by the exertion of powerful pressure from the one church with a solid majority opposed to Marcionism and other 'deviations' did the churches of the Roman world gradually form a united 'orthodox' body. Practically and historically, it is indeed Rome that defines orthodoxy, and imposes its own order upon the chaos of interpretations prevailing elsewhere. Chadwick, in contrast, at least hints at a quite different reading: there are factors internal to the Christian enterprise – all, in fact, that is summed up by 'Jerusalem', the common origin, the 'mother of all churches' – which work towards a unified, if not uniform, orthodoxy not dependent upon a single central authority. There would have been orthodoxy without Rome – or, at least, Rome is *part* of the story of evolving orthodoxy, not its only begetter.

The present essay attempts to see whether Bauer's explicit or Chadwick's implicit schema better fits the facts – or whether, indeed, the discussion needs to enter a new phase altogether, with new questions asked. Does it make sense to think of a single and continuous Christian history, a steady movement towards the (nearly) universal dogmatic syntheses of the fourth and fifth centuries? Few scholars could be found to support such a thesis in those simple terms. Or is the orthodox consensus an historical accident? If the latter is true, considerable problems arise for the contemporary believer and the believer's delegate, the systematic theologian: is any version of Christianity as valid or 'authentic' as any other? if so, there can be little if any serious or productive *conflict* about goals and priorities between Christians *as* Christians – they have only a factitious common ground. Or can we at least say that Christianity is a set of competing claims about a certain definable cluster of issues, even if it is not a scheme of consistent and authoritative 'readings' of the human world? Or is that in itself an impossibly controversial redefinition of Christianity as it has *in fact* perceived itself? The question of whether there was an identifiable 'orthodoxy', a prevailing sense of the norms of Christian identity, prior to AD 300 has disturbingly wide repercussions. It also raises issues concerning methodological foundations in the study of religions overall – an area which theologians are liable to neglect: how, if at all, is one to identify the 'centre' of *any* religious tradition? At what point

and why do we start speaking about 'a' religion, an interconnected pattern of symbolic resources with some kind of coherence? Or is the whole notion of looking for the essence of a particular religion, or the essence of what makes this or that tradition a *religion*, a mistake?

Bauer's case is interesting because, despite his hostility to the idea of doctrinal norms, he is not free from a certain kind of essentialism. The last chapter of his book makes it clear that he sees the Pauline mission as somehow basic to the Christian phenomenon. Paul's own move westwards dictates the shape and locus of Christian development, but his own distinctive perceptions are buried in that very process (pp. 232ff.). He is tolerant of purely doctrinal pluralism (pp. 234–5), and his general attitude rests upon a 'confidence that the Christian religion will again eliminate from itself whatever is alien to it' (p. 236). 'The Christian religion': Bauer assumes that such a category would make sense of Paul, perhaps even *to* Paul. There is a spiritual centre, after all, to the Christian phenomenon, with some kind of self-correcting, self-directing energy. Although Bauer does not himself endorse this 'Pauline' assumption, the entire tenor of this final chapter suggests that Bauer's is ultimately a history of *loss*, of the obscuring of some primitive and fundamental vision and life by ecclesiastical struggles and definitions. The idea of Christian religion in its Pauline integrity sits light to formulae and strictly doctrinal anathemas, and thus gives free play to distorting transformations by groups (such as Gnostics) concerned to domesticate and possess the original impulse in a variety of ambivalent ways. So subtly and precariously balanced is Paul's reflection on Christ and the believer's relation to Christ that it carries the seeds of wildly divergent theologies. Only by – to some extent – imitating the 'heretical' process of manipulation and definition does 'true' religion survive, undergoing a sea-change as it identifies itself over against what it is not. Heresy is the necessary precondition for orthodoxy, yet orthodoxy may be as much a metamorphosis (or pseudomorphosis) of the foundational religious idea as heresy.

Behind this it is possible to discern a version of the celebrated 'criterion of dissimilarity' applied in form-critical studies to the sayings of Jesus.[4] The indubitably authentic and distinctive is what cannot be generated reflectively out of what goes before (Judaism) or comes after (the church). So, in the history of Christian belief, the distinctive 'idea' of the Christian religion is an elusive spiritual possibility *not* present in Judaism or in gnosis or in merely ecclesiastical faith. The *novum* in Christianity is both utterly discontinuous with what goes before and

unrepeatable in what follows: as in Bultmann's vision,[5] it is a proclamation interrupting history, defining and authenticating itself, free therefore to defend, sustain and renew itself by its own inner energy, shaking off what is alien. The essentialism of Harnack's approach is refined and corrected in the crucible of something like a theology of the Word. Schneemelcher, in an important obituary tribute to Bauer,[6] emphasized the difference between Bauer and Harnack, in terms of Bauer's refusal to adopt Harnack's *Verfallstheorie* version of church history, which is simply a liberal Protestant reincarnation of the patristic idea of heresy as a *degeneration* from orthodoxy; for Bauer, so Schneemelcher claims, the primitive unity of the Christian community lay not in doctrine or in concordant apostolic testimony, but in relationship with the one Lord. Bauer does not state this with complete clarity, and much work still needs to be done on his own theological assumptions, but it is plain that he thinks in terms of a unity deeper and other than the visible unity of 'Organisation, Lehre und Kultus', which is the product simply of historical process.[7] The unity that matters is that of the (invisible?) body of Christ.[8] All other models are determined by or assimilated to the cultural circumstances of the day (the criterion of dissimilarity once more). The true uniqueness of Christian faith is grounded in the person of Jesus, while the empirical church 'steht unter vielfachen, von aussen in sie einströmenden Einflüssen' (p. 21). The gospel can never escape the necessity of such transmutations, but it remains in essence free of them.

What Schneemelcher does here, in fact, is to ascribe to Bauer (quite correctly, I think) a yet more radical form of *Verfallstheorie*. The Christian 'idea' in its purity is bound up with something not patient of articulation and definition, unity with Christ in his Body. In other words, a particular Pauline theologoumenon is identified as the heart of Christian identity; and, as we have seen, Paul's doctrinal tolerance – beyond this central insight – is implicitly commended, though acknowledged at the same time to be the seedbed for both 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy'. Not even Paul can find words for faith that will avoid ambiguity and the risk of betrayal. As indicated already, Bauer assumes that the essence of the Christian faith is a principle beyond history and speech: once this 'transcendental' reality is 'categorially' expressed and apprehended, it is *mis*apprehended, and the more thoroughgoing the articulation, the graver the distortion. Bauer is, indeed, not guilty of any kind of *historical* primitivism, not even Harnack's variety; but he is still bound up in a philosophical world where 'inner' truthfulness is

perennially at odds with and at risk from the deceitfulness of material history, and still disposed to see the heart of Christianity as a supernatural – non-worldly, non-historical – still point, to which the contradictory and compromised phenomena of time (persons, words, institutions) are related in an inexpressible or inscrutable way. Hence the links of sympathy and understanding between Bauer and Bultmann.[9]

II

Such an understanding of the 'essence' of a religion has been challenged recently by Jonathan Z. Smith's learned and subtle essays in the anthropology of religion, especially 'In Comparison a Magic Dwells',[10] in which there is a pointed critique of religious taxonomies that seek to isolate a normative core in a religious tradition and which speak of the distinctive 'logic' of a tradition, as if it could be assumed to be a single *system*. Smith argues (pp. 31–5) that the most enormous questions are begged by the assumption that 'religions' are fundamentally self-contained *objects*, each with a timeless inner logic and homogeneity that excludes others. Rather, in any one tradition, there may be different systems, different 'logics', operating within different texts: the theoretical problem with which we are left is how our awareness of the *interplay* between such different texts might enable us to say anything about the *unity* between them. 'Comparison is, at base, never identity'; so, 'How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of other things?' (p. 36).

If we are not permitted to speak of 'essences', how shall we define *a* religion at all? Perhaps we should begin by noting that the question itself is an odd one in many contexts. The 'religion' of classical Greece or Rome or modern India is simply the totality of cultic practices, mythology and speculation about the gods current among the people of a specific area or ethnic–linguistic unit or network of such units. Religious definition is inseparable from definition as a people or a city or whatever; the *de facto* context in which a person lives is assumed to be the source for 'meaning', the provider of a comprehensive pattern or map of the cosmos. This is mythologized in terms of there being a manifest and visible centre of the world within this environment – a shrine which acts as navel of the earth, as ultimate locus of sacred power and guarantor of the stability of things. Or else, in slightly more rationalized form, the same view may be expressed in terms of cultural and linguistic normativity (Greeks and barbarians).[11] Whatever the

exact articulation, however, the basic point is that in such a setting the question of how a 'religion' identifies itself, let alone what its essence is, is meaningless: the search for coherence, for an organizing principle that would help us to locate this system in a typology of religions, is a waste of time, an attempt to answer questions that are not being (and cannot sensibly be) asked. Religious speech and behaviour here is bound to a sacral understanding of the world of immediate social and material experience: it is what Smith calls 'locative' in its emphasis – and is characteristically, though not 'essentially', linked with a hierarchy that guards and administers the loci of holiness and determines access to them.[12]

The problem of strictly *religious* definition arises only when irresoluble crises afflict the 'locative' religious life of a society, when it is no longer clear or credible that the *de facto* environment, cosmic and social, does provide meaning and pattern: the cosmos (including the sacred space secured in the social framework) is, in fact, no longer perceived as *cosmos*, as a givenness of order.[13] This may be the result of the destruction of a shrine, or the end of a monarchy, or the slower erosion of belief in cultic efficacy if it is seen to be too nakedly allied with dominant ideology in a situation of acute injustice, or the development of techniques of production that shift economic power and so alter supposedly immutable social relations, or any of these combining with any or all of the others.[14] It should perhaps be added that, unless one is the crudest kind of reductionist, none of this rules out the statement that we are dealing with crises about the experience of God or the gods; it merely reinforces the manifest truth that religious and social meanings or possibilities are not to be easily or glibly dissociated by the observer who starts from the voluntarist and privatized religious conventions of the post-Enlightenment West. The crises of 'locative' religion, however, represent a major factor in the history that leads to such conventions, because they provoke a radical separation between social and religious meaning; to borrow once more from Smith's analysis, we may speak of a 'utopian' or 'diasporic' religious speech and practice emerging, in which the moments of loss and liminality, inversion, contradiction, which had a specific, controlled, dialectical function in locative religion, become the moments of decisive insight. The existing order is to be rejected, history and cosmos are no longer to be trusted: we are aliens in the perceivable universe.

The question of definition and authenticity here arises for the first time as a distinctively religious issue. If the social context does not offer

identity, a final and comprehensive identity, what is the context that replaces it? In Hannah Arendt's terminology, how are we 'to find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world'?[15] If there is to be a religious practice other than the locative, it must offer to those involved a definition or self-perception as strong as, or stronger than, that provided by the failed sacral society: that is to say, it cannot (from the point of view of the historian of religions) be identified simply with an incommunicable spiritual essence somehow present in the founder, or, as Bultmann might see it, the bare proclamation of the *Dass* of divine activity in the cross of Jesus. It will inevitably mean the construction of other sorts of social unities. We are faced with the question of what is definitive for a particular 'religion' precisely because the very concept of *a* religion results from there being a set of religious practices (cult, myth, doctrine, initiation, and so on) not catered for in the self-definition of the society in which they are set. But one obvious corollary of this is that, at the origins of a new, non-locative, tradition, we are bound to find debate and unclarity: we may see what the new phenomenon is *not* more clearly than what it is. A recent collection of essays on Buddhism – that supremely non-locative faith – observes that the Buddha 'saw himself as simply preaching the Dharma', that account of the world which presents the possibility of escape from the world, and that a 'Buddhist' is simply one who relies on this for liberation.[16] Since the Dharma cuts across the caste system of ancient India, a 'Buddhist' is paradigmatically one who opts out of that system: someone who belongs in no caste, who is not defined by brahminically dominated society and has no role in it – thus a mendicant, a monk or nun, a person without job or family. 'Buddhism' is, primitively, the Sangha, the monastic order, those voluntarily outside Indian society for the sake of Dharma.[17] Its identity as a developed system of thought, to which non-monastics may adhere, 'taking refuge' in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, rests, as this formula implies, on the central fact of the repudiation of caste society in the name not of an alternative 'social programme' (the Sangha could co-exist with brahminical society) but of the vision of a way of salvation. The detail of early Buddhist theory is often obscure: it emerges as a *practice* of radical detachment, social and personal, and its clarity and definition as a religious phenomenon is to be found in the social reality of those performing such a practice.

No 'religion', no set of observable practices of a certain kind, can be wholly utopian or liminal – obviously not, since we are talking about what is, among other things, a social fact, something with a language

and a memory. Smith notes that the figure of the charismatic magician could, in late antiquity, provide one way back to some of the values of the locative, in that his *presence* comes to be seen as the locus of holiness.[18] Some forms of Buddhism, notably in Tibet, have done the same thing on a large scale, by way of doctrines of the presence of a bodhisattva in a living holy man, and a highly sophisticated account of sacred succession in concrete monastic centres. It is also possible to carry through a paradoxical revaluation of the holy places of a parent tradition; so that (for example) Jerusalem, for the author of Luke-Acts, remains centrally significant in the new sacred narrative as the point to which and from which various lines lead, because it is the site of Jesus' *exodes* and vindication. Such borrowings or reworkings do not, however, modify the fundamental point that a counter-society is being created: what they do is to suggest that this counter-society's means of self-definition are not entirely discontinuous with those of the parent tradition – a significant claim, in contexts where novelty is suspect. There may still be a 'centre', a single focus of power and meaning, though one radically at odds with the structures of the parent tradition, and perhaps involving (as in the case of the magician) a reinterpretation of the very idea of holy place in terms of personal contact or proximity[19] – anthropology superseding cosmology, in Smith's language.[20] But there may also be a more drastic version of the possible criteria for belonging in the counter-society of a new religion. The primitive Sangha in Buddhism is the community of those sharing the perception of Dharma as the route to liberation: there is at least an element here of appeal to a common *experience*, though it is very muted. But it is not difficult to think of religious communities in which having the requisite initiatory experience is a crucial factor in determining belonging and not-belonging. Initiatory experience may be an aspect of locative religion,[21] but it will take on a different sort of weight in other religious styles. 'Charismatic' and 'prophet' churches in Christianity lay heavy stress upon this, and the New Testament itself indicates how important such an appeal was for many primitive Christian groups.[22] It seems reasonably clear that this was true of gnostic or gnosticizing communities in the second Christian century: to belong was to have received *ennoia*, enlightening insight.

The struggle over 'orthodoxy' in the pre-Nicene period is the struggle over which *kinds* of criteria will prevail in communities calling themselves Christian. H.-D. Altendorf, in a perceptive discussion of Bauer's categories and vocabulary, observes that the conflicts of the

second Christian century are not usefully understood as a *case* of orthodox–heretical disagreement: they constitute a specific phenomenon in which the very possibility of such a disagreement, the terms in which an argument can be conducted, is being defined.[23] The primitive fact seems to be the existence around the Mediterranean, and further east in Syria, of groups manifestly dependent in certain respects upon the Jewish tradition, yet more or less alienated from it in virtue of some sort of commitment to or dependence on the figure of Jesus,[24] a dependence normally expressed by means of a distinctive initiation rite (baptism), widely seen as bestowing membership of a new 'race'.[25] It is a classically non-locative phenomenon, engaged in vigorous polemic against shrine and hierarchy in Jerusalem in its earliest years, assuming the radical dislocation or senselessness of the existing religious and political order, depending upon highly mobile teachers establishing new communities well outside the original sacral context. All these features breed particular tensions. Polemic against shrine and hierarchy may involve the rejection of the whole notion of sacred place, or a rival claim on the *same* place, or the transferring of shrine imagery to the new community itself, wherever it is. The first option is perhaps discernible in the Johannine literature,[26] and fuels some second-century argument (Justin's debate with Trypho);[27] in the next generation (Clement of Alexandria) it unites with a general Platonic relativizing of the contingent and particular.[28] The second can be seen in that narrative revaluation of Jerusalem already mentioned as characteristic of Luke, but perhaps also in the elusive, quasi-priestly figure of James at Jerusalem, and the community around him.[29] The third is present in 1 Peter, and perhaps in Revelation, and its imagery is foreshadowed in the Qumran literature, in which the community is itself a counter-temple.[30] As for the assumption of the meaninglessness of present order, this can appear as the apocalyptic hope of restoration or the gnostic repudiation of material creation as such.[31] And the mobility of teachers raises the question of how far they are answerable to each other, or share an identifiable point of reference, as well as the further problem of how the crisis of one locative system is to be induced and interpreted in another as something fundamentally the same (how the crucified Messiah becomes the crucified Logos).

'Early Christianity' is the field within which conflicts about these matters are fought out; its unity – like that of early Buddhism – is perceptible mostly in negative terms, in its tormentingly complex relation to the Jewish cult, law and scriptures,[32] but has some positive

content simply in the focussing of that new complexity upon the words and acts and fate of Jesus. At its most straightforward, this amounts to not much more than the belief that Jesus (like the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness) is both forerunner of and martyr for a renewed Israel, with its cult and hierarchy purged of corruption: the utopian or diasporic element in Christian identity is temporary and fortuitous. At its least straightforward, the relation to the Jewish world is something like symmetrical opposition: Christian belief is the reversed image of Jewish, Jesus the enemy of the God of the old covenant. Both the community and Jesus are discontinuous with the past; and there is also the sense that the community's connection with Jesus as himself an actual figure of the past is fragile. What he says, what he is, can be absorbed into the community's experience of enlightenment and liberation: *his* identity depends upon his role in the process of enlightenment. Hence the literary genre of *post-resurrection* dialogues between Jesus and his disciples, an ahistorical setting in which Jesus can be exclusively characterized as enlightener, and so identified in relation to the gnostic believer's experience.[33] In this account, the utopian wholly dominates, in that the idea of being at home in the universe, even to the extent of belonging in an historical continuity with the founder of faith, practically vanishes; definition is found only through common experience.

It is not surprising that not much of a consistent history can be plotted for groups with such views: the nature of their beliefs would effectively prevent their being in the mainstream of any institutional evolution.[34] The 'common experience' criterion for belonging does little to guarantee any socially durable unity: it is *not* 'strong enough to replace the world'. The creation of a new *genos* requires at least some of the features of a 'natural' society, and a significant dimension of what comes to constitute Christian orthodoxy is to do with this need. If the criteria that finally matter in determining where the true church is to be found move increasingly away from the narrowly experiential pole, this is partly for straightforward reasons of survival: what has staying power (and is *seen* as having staying power, and so pursued for that reason) is what offers a public, a social, identifying context for the believer – institutional, narrative and behavioural norms. But more than this, since the new *genos* is by definition not limited by geographical locality, continuities in space need to be preserved between scattered groups; identity with a kindred but spatially distant community must be affirmed and evidenced.

III

Here we touch upon a crucially important factor in the coming-together of a mainstream 'catholic' or 'orthodox' version of Christian belief. Groups regarded as heterodox had peripatetic teachers, moving from one Mediterranean city to another,[35] or crossing the eastern frontiers,[36] but we have no literary or archaeological evidence to suggest that there were regular and significant links between the congregations they established. In dramatic contrast, the Christianity of the New Testament documents and of the broadly non-gnostic churches of the second century presents us with an enormous amount of evidence for what can sometimes seem like an almost obsessional mutual interest and interchange. Paul's epistles established links not only between the apostle and his congregations but between the congregations themselves. The whole of the Epistle to the Romans represents the opening of a new link between Pauline and other churches, and chapter 16 (whether or not it originally belongs in this context)[37] both reinforces existing connections between communities and, in its recommendation of Phoebe of Cenchreae, extends them. The celebrated 'collection for the saints' appears in 1 Corinthians 16 as a bond between Gentile churches as well as between them and Jerusalem; and here again, Paul's transmission of greetings between churches works towards the creation of a sense of shared identity. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, there is a blatant appeal to a number of unregenerate motives: surely Corinth will not let Paul down by failing to come up to the standard of generosity set by the Macedonian churches? especially when he has so sung the praises of the Corinthian believers. 1 Thessalonians points again to the significance of 'report' among the churches, the acquiring of a recognized name for hospitality and faithfulness. Colossians 4:7–18 may or may not be Pauline, but verse 16 establishes the existence of a convention among the Pauline churches of exchanging letters from the apostle.

However, it is not only the Pauline communities that operate in this way: 1 Peter[38] and 2 and 3 John presuppose networks of churches with epistolary links running through an 'apostolic' co-ordinator. 1 Peter has several features of interest: it lays particular emphasis on the gift of a new communal identity, membership of a 'people' (2:9–10) living as 'exiles' (1:1, 2:11) among the Gentiles (2:12, 4:3).[39] The imagery of the Jewish diaspora is deployed as a model for the self-understanding of Christian communities: common baptism, in which the 'word' of God's eternal election is appropriated (1:23, 3:21–2), substitutes for common

ancestry; and in this ritually effected exile from the social order, a new 'household' is entered (4:17),[40] which 'throughout the world' (5:9) faces the same rejection and hostility. The proclamation of this shared vulnerability, the assurance that the local community's experience *vis-à-vis* the surrounding society is shared the world over, is a very weighty part of the epistle's construction of an identity for the baptized.

Discussion could be extended, but enough has been said to underline the importance, in at least a substantial number of first-century churches, of the sense of belonging with comparable communities and having a certain responsibility to them; the Pauline collection for the saints is a (doubtfully effective) attempt at binding Gentile churches to Jerusalem in a way similar to that in which they were – through Paul's mediation – bound to each other. The literary form which dominates the Christian canon is the letter in which the missionary creates in his clusters of proselytes a sense of a common world, and so creates the conditions for communication between them. Less emphasis is laid upon an identifiable *individual* core experience of inner enlightenment in virtue of which the members of the new *genos* are united than upon the manifest fact of belonging to communities with distinctive patterns of relation and behaviour, capable of a certain sort of exchange with each other, and facing the same problems of exposure and insecurity in the face of the two most firmly established modes of religious identity available: Mediterranean civic piety and ethnically determined Jewish practice. There are few if any analogues in the culture of the day to the enterprise represented by the canonical epistles;[41] and that we know them as 'canonical' says something about the constitutive part in the formation of orthodoxy played by this enterprise.

For it is not confined to the New Testament. Apart from Clement's letter to Corinth on behalf of the Roman church, and Ignatius' correspondence, we have an extensive record in Eusebius of the epistolary habit of Christian leaders. From the time of Ignatius onwards, the letter reinforcing the authority of the leader of another community by reaffirming fellowship is a widespread phenomenon; and for Eusebius, the stature of a bishop is evidently measured in part by the range of his recorded correspondence, the degree to which he activates the lines of communication between churches and participates in the debates of sister communities. Dionysius of Corinth is commended explicitly for his vigour in this regard,[42] and Dionysius of Alexandria, whose extensive correspondence is carefully itemized,[43] is said to have left a 'varied source of profit' to the churches, and is evidently regarded

as a figure of special authority. Letters by such figures may carry accounts of local martyrdom or persecution, offering other churches a share, so to speak, in the grace bestowed on a particular congregation;[44] or they may carry an acknowledgment of a newly elected bishop in the recipient community, confirming the unbroken communication between the churches,[45] or they may either endorse or dispute a particular disciplinary ruling from a bishop or synod of bishops, affirming, whether negatively or positively, the principle of the mutual accountability of physically distant churches.[46] In two cases recorded by Eusebius,[47] the bishop of Rome is censured for breaking communication over such issues: he is reminded by other bishops of the legitimate variety of inherited traditions in local churches, and, in the paschal controversy of the late second century, his attention is firmly drawn to the documentation of an earlier discussion in which this variety was accepted by the Roman pontiff. Disagreement may be sharp, it may even reach (as in the controversy over schismatic baptism) to quite fundamental points of practice; but the very expression of disagreement *within* the network of correspondence means that it remains a 'domestic' affair, a family quarrel. It is a misunderstanding of the nature of the 'catholic' network to move rapidly to an open break because of local divergences.

Eusebius, of course, has a consistent interest in representing the life of the church as essentially peaceful and harmonious; but this does not mean that he is to be mistrusted in these matters. On the contrary: consciously or not, he paints in his history a vivid picture of a catholic church whose unity is actually *articulated* in a steady flow of literary exchange between its parts, an exchange which is by no means always easy or harmonious, but whose continuance is crucial to the health and continuity of the whole, something not lightly to be broken by suspension of communion or of ministerial recognition. The atmosphere of the church as thus evoked can at times be claustrophobic to the reader of Eusebius, in just the way that the intense, warm, interfering mutuality of a set of letters between a Victorian family or circle of friends may be to the twentieth-century literary historian or biographer. But it is not quite the atmosphere suggested by Bauer, of the skilful manipulation by a single powerful church of the increasingly dependent relations to it of other churches. Nor is it quite, on the other hand, a climate in which the unity of the *local* church, the concrete eucharistic community in one particular place, is virtually the sole concern for the first century and a half of Christianity, with homogeneity in teaching and practice only

assuming significance as theology acquired a more metaphysical tinge (the unity of the church as symbol of the unity of history and cosmos in the Logos).[48] It is an atmosphere which manifests something of the nature of the origins of local Christian communities in *mission*: they are planted or established by non-local agencies and so take on not only a *de facto* foreignness in their context, as 'resident aliens',[49] but also a sense of belonging to and with parent groups or personalities (or groups representing and identifying with personalities – 'Pauline' and 'Johannine' churches) elsewhere. Missionary foundation means that a particular church's existence is bound up with a history of personal contact: the greater the sense that the local church identifies itself in relation to its origins, the greater the significance of maintaining such contact; and the greater the connection between the idea of a 'normative' Christianity and the practices that maintain accountability between churches – correspondence, the sharing of both problems and achievements, travel,[50] ministerial recognition.[51] Only against such a fluid and complex background does the emergence of a canon of writings become possible and make sense. 'Orthodoxy', in short, depends heavily on the sheer mobility of believers as missionaries in the first generation and emissaries later on; it has a great deal to do with ease of communication in the Roman world, with all that – paradoxically – makes it possible to create and sustain a 'rival' world of interlocking and supportive communities.[52]

I have already suggested that, at the most pragmatic level, this is how 'non-locative' religious groups survive: the community whose identity is simply bound up in its members' claim to a single decisive religious experience is far more vulnerable. Yet, as we have seen, gnostic communities depended just as much as any others on the mobility of missionaries: why is there apparently no development comparable to the epistolary spider's web uniting what would become the catholic churches? The answer, or possible answer, to this may point us towards an account of orthodoxy less baldly sociological and pragmatic. Gnostic texts characteristically have a message, a point to be grasped: there is a sense in which the origins or process of gnostic conversion are irrelevant once it has happened. The experience is reproduceable, and the convert's relation to the teacher is not simply one of continuing unilateral dependence ('If you meet the Buddha, kill him' is an injunction many Gnostics would have understood) – though it would manifestly be wrong to suggest that the gnostic convert was a kind of spiritual monad, indifferent to membership in a group of like-minded 'proficients': if that